

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
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Sports idioms in movies: A corpus-based study

BA thesis

MARIN MERISALU

SUPERVISOR: Assoc. Prof. Enn Veldi

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ABSTRACT

Idioms, including sports idioms, are commonly used in spoken language and the aim of this thesis is to explore how they have been used over time. In addition to studying the change in popularity the thesis also studies their use in different English varieties and their classification based on Makkai's (1972) idiom classifications system.

The introduction gives an overview of the thesis and is followed by the literature review which introduces Liu's (2008) study on different scholars' views on defining idioms and using them, Glucksberg and McGlone's (2001) work on understanding idioms and their flexibility and two studies on the use of idioms. The empirical part of the thesis consists of a corpus-based study on sports idioms and their use in movies. By using The Movie Corpus (Davies 2019) the change in their frequency in movies from the 1930 to the 2010s was studied. In addition, it was analysed which English varieties they were more characteristic of and which classification categories they belong according to Makkai's (1972) system. It is also shown how the idioms support the metaphorical concept of 'life is sport' and they are all categorized as negative or positive based on their meanings.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on a set of sports idioms and their use in everyday language. Idioms are a form of figurative speech and they are usually multiword phrases. What separates them from other phrases is that they convey a different meaning from the literal meanings of the words they consist of. They are used to make speech more descriptive and livelier. Sports idioms are idioms that originate from sports terminology and are used in various other contexts outside sports.

Idioms enrich the lexicon and have existed for a long time, though there is no way of telling where exactly it all began. The Bible was one of the first widespread written works, which is also the source of many idioms (e.g. *bite the dust*, *broken heart*). William Shakespeare used idioms in his work as well (e.g. *wild goose chase*, *green-eyed monster*). Even *fair play*, which is nowadays a widely used sports term, originates from Shakespeare's works (Chetwynd 2016: 190). Sports have played an important role in enriching our language. They are widespread thanks to the popularity of sports and the famous people who have used the terms outside the sports context. For example, many US presidents have used sports idioms in their speeches. It is easy to compare one's everyday struggles and experiences to the nature of sports: competitiveness, victories, and losses. Chetwynd (2016: 2) has summarized it as follows: "So it makes sense that when we dig deep for words to express our personal turmoil or we want to revel in our success, we mine the world of ritualized contests for the right sentiments."

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to a better understanding of idioms, especially sports idioms, and their use. The corpus-based study was conducted to learn how frequently

widely known sports idioms have been used in movies and to understand which English-speaking countries they are most characteristic of. In addition, different scholars' views were studied and all the idioms in the corpus study were analysed to understand the specifics to classifying idioms and the many ways to do it. The set of idioms chosen for the thesis was also interpreted in context of the metaphorical concept of 'life is sport' and their negative and positive connotations.

Many studies deal with idioms as a form figurative speech with an emphasis on metaphors. The literature review starts with an introduction to the work by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980). This is followed by three sections: defining idioms, understanding idioms and using idioms.

The first section of the literature review, defining idioms, will focus on what are idioms and how different scholars have defined them. The section has a subsection introducing idiom classification and the system used in the empirical part of the thesis. The second section is about understanding idioms and what aspects influence their recognition. A subsection is devoted to understanding the flexibility of idioms and what that means. The third section is devoted to the use of idioms and introduces a couple of previous studies on the subject. There is a subsection introducing a study about the use of different idioms with positive and negative semantic prosody (connotations) and a second subsection on the influence of sports on American English.

The empirical part consists of a corpus-based study on sports idioms in movies. Ten sports idioms were analysed using The Movie Corpus to get an understanding of how much the idioms have been used in movies, how the use of these idioms has changed over time and

to which English variety the idioms are more distinctive based on the result of the corpus. An idiom classification system (Makkai 1972) was used to analyse the idioms by their structural differences. Finally, the idioms were analysed as part of the metaphorical concept of ‘life is sport’ and their meanings were analysed to see whether they are positive or negative in their essence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The English language, like any other language, has a way of conveying a meaning by using words the literal definition of which might not even be close to the thought that has been said. We call such linguistic units idioms, which are based on metaphor and metonymy. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980: 5) have described the essence of metaphors as “under-standing and experiencing one kind of thing in term of another”. Their work started a whole new understanding of metaphors and their use. As Kövecses (2010: 12) points out, the idea was not new, but thanks to Lakoff and Johnson it was now a “comprehensive, generalized, and empirically tested theory”.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) started looking at metaphors not just as expressions, but as whole concepts. Their argument was that our thoughts and conversations consist of all kinds of metaphorical concepts, even though we might not associate them at first. In their book they have many examples how a metaphorical concept is a part of our everyday language. One of their examples is the concept that ‘life is a gambling game’. Each of the concepts is supported by several example sentences, for this one in particular they had used many (sports) idioms, like *odds are against me* or *ace up my sleeve*. Expressions as these are common and everyone knows what they mean, but when using them usually people are not thinking about the fact that they are idioms. Their theory applies to this thesis and its empirical part as well. The aim

is to analyse the use of sports idioms in everyday language, that is, in other areas of life than their usual sport-related context, which supports the concept of ‘life is sport’. Aspects of everyday life can be seen as sporting events – one can be *out of someone’s league* when it comes to relationships; you can *strike out* or *hit a home run* on business deals; *throw in the towel* in an argument or *dive in head-first* in an unfamiliar situation.

Defining idioms

As the subject of this thesis is idioms, it is important to understand what exactly an idiom is. However, this is something that is yet to be decided. The definition of idioms is something that depends on a person’s views. Liu (2008) studied definitions of the word ‘idiom’ by different scholars and found the definitions differ based on the scholar’s research purpose. Studying nine different ways scholars had defined idioms he found that there was no common understanding on what exactly an idiom is. Some scholars used very narrow criteria while others considered a much wider range of words/phrases as idioms. For example, he found that Hockett was the only one that included mono-morphemes, while others (e.g. Katz & Postal, Makkai, Fraser) considered only polymorphemic or multi-words as idioms. However, most of them agreed on idioms being multi-word phrases generally with rigid structure, where the meaning of the phrase is not derived from the literal meanings of the words in the phrases. That is the general definition of idioms found in dictionaries as well.

Liu (2008) points out that the question of defining idioms is difficult and depends on who we are defining it for. For scholars there are many different aspects to consider, but for the students, whether learning a second language or not, the key elements to define an idiom are “opaqueness in meaning and frozenness in structure” (Liu 2008:13).

Classifying idioms

As different scholars have different views on defining idioms, there are also many ways to classify idioms. Liu (2008:16–21) analysed different classification systems and according to him, although none of the different system can be considered as the best one, he did find that Makkai's lexemic versus sememic idioms system had good practical value for language learners and for that reason this was chosen for the empirical part of this thesis as well. Another reason for preferring this system was, that although, as mentioned below as well, there is some overlapping between the categories, the system has very specific, but at the same time a bit flexible criteria for the categories, which means that one should be able to find a category for any idiom.

Liu (2008: 16–18) gave a summarizing overview of Makkai's (1972) idiom classification system, which is also used in this thesis to analyse the selected idioms. The system divides idioms into two categories: lexemic and sememic.

Lexemic idioms are polylexonic lexemes according to Makkai (1972: 122). What makes them different from other lexemes is that “they are subject to a possible lack of understanding despite familiarity with the meanings of the components, or to erroneous decoding: they can potentially mislead the uninformed listener, or they can misinform him” (Makkai 1972: 122). This is in short, the general definition of idioms that the meaning of the idiom is not derived from the meaning of the components. There are 6 types of lexemic idioms in his systems and four of them (tournures, irreversible binominals, phrasal compounds and incorporating verb idioms) have extra subclassifications as well. The phrasal compounds category has the most subclassifications as there are numerous ways how different types of word can be used together in a phrase.

Sememic idioms according to Makkai (1972: 198) are defined as: “a polylexemic construction who aggregate literal meaning derived from its constituent lexemes functions additionally as the realization of an unpredictable sememic network”. This category includes phrases (e.g. proverbs, conventional expressions) which have connections to specific cultures. For sememic idioms Makkai (1972) has described eight categories. None of the sememic categories have and subcategories in the classification system.

All the categories and their definitions as described in brief in Liu’s study (2008:17–18) are compiled in the following table, which was also the basis for the analysis of the idioms in the empirical part of the thesis:

| Lexemic idioms | | Sememic idioms | |
|---|---|---|--|
| Idioms consisting of more than one word, but their meaning is not the cumulative sum of the meanings of its parts | | Idioms of multiple-word structures whose meaning is derived from its constituent lexemes and has an unpredictable sememic network | |
| Phrasal verbs | Structures each consisting of a verb plus one or two particles | “first base” idioms | Expressions based on “nationwide” cultural institutions such as American baseball, football, etc |
| Tournures | Structures each made up of a verb plus at least two lexons | Idioms of institutionalized politeness | Conventional polite expressions |
| Irreversible binominals | Structures each composed of two nouns in a fixed order | Idioms of institutionalized detachment or indirectness | Conventional expressions indicating detachment or indirectness |
| Phrasal compounds | Compound nouns and adjectives | Idioms of proposal encoded as questions | Conventional expressions of making proposals |
| Incorporating verbs | Compound verbs | Proverbial idioms with a “moral” | Well-recognized proverbs in a language |
| Pseudo-idioms | Compound words or phrases in which one of the constituents a “cranberry morph” or which one or more lexons are “banned” | Idioms of institutionalized greeting | Conventional expressions of greeting |
| | | Familiar quotations as idioms | Quotations from well-known figures or sources |
| | | Idiomatcity in institutionalized understatement | Conventional expressions of understatement to lessen the impact of a blunt statement |

Table 1. The classification of idioms (Makkai 1972)

Understanding idioms

Glucksberg and McGlone (2001) have divided idioms into four categories or types: non-compositional, compositional opaque, compositional transparent and quasi-metaphorical. In order to understand idioms, it is first important to recognise them.

According to Glucksberg and McGlone (2001) people recognise idioms in the same way as they recognise regular words: by process of elimination. With fixed expressions, like idioms, predictability is the most important aspect of identifying them. With some idioms it is easier to predict the next words; therefore, they are recognised more quickly. The more unique the expression, especially the first (couple) words, the easier they are to recognise. Glucksberg and McGlone used the examples of *ballpoint pen* ('ballpoint' being very easily associated with pen) and phrases beginning with the word 'just' (*just around the corner*, *just like taking candy from a baby*, etc). In the latter case there are many options how the phrase might continue, therefore it is not easily predictable and takes longer to identify. It all depends on the key word of the phrase and its position. If the key word, which makes the phrase unique, is at the beginning then it is more quickly recognisable compared to phrases where the key word is in the end. The understanding of idioms and their idiomatic meaning is activated only after encountering the key word and they follow the all or nothing rule: a person either recognises the idiom and is familiar with its meaning or does not recognise nor understand it. (Glucksberg and McGlone 2001). This applies to sports idioms as well. There are many idioms starting with the word 'out' (*out of left field*, *out for the count*, *out of someone's league*, etc), meaning the realization which idiom is being used comes later than for example with *slam dunk*, where the first word 'slam' is mostly associated with 'dunk'.

As mentioned, Glucksberg and McGlone's idea is supported by previous work by other scholars who divided idioms into four types based on compositionality (non-compositional, partially compositional or fully compositional) and semantic transparency (opaque or transparent). With non-compositional idioms there is no relation between the constituents of the idiom and the meaning of the idiom, whereas in fully compositional ones "the constituents map directly onto the idiomatic referents" (Glucksberg and McGlone 2001:73). For example, the idiom *front runner* can be considered as a fully compositional one, as its literal meaning is that someone is running ahead of everyone else.

The degree of transparency in idioms means whether the meaning of the idioms can be understood by the meaning of its constituents. Although generally it is possible to divide idioms as opaque or transparent, when it comes to learning a language, an idiom might be opaque to the learner but transparent to someone who is already fluent. It means that for an idiom's meaning to be understandable, one must first be introduced to the interpretation of the idiom. Once the idiom is familiar, its meaning will become transparent.

Recognition and understanding a familiar idiom, which is already in one's memory, is similar to understanding other lexical elements. However, when the idiom is not in its conventional form, there are a minimum of six steps to understand the variant, according to Glucksberg and McGlone (2001):

1. Recognize the idiom as a variant of a conventional idiom.
 2. Retrieve the meaning of the original idiom.
 3. Identify the constituent meanings of both the variant and the original idioms.
 4. Compare the constituent meanings of the two idiom forms.
 5. Identify the relation(s) between those meanings (e.g. verb tense, quantification, negation).
 6. On the basis of this relation, infer the relation between the meanings of the original and variant idioms.
- (Glucksberg and McGlone 2001: 77)

An alternative strategy they introduced was that if an idiom is familiar, then its constituents have acquired both the lexical and idiomatic definitions in one's mind. Therefore, as one reads an idiom not in its conventional form, their mind will still recognise both the lexical and idiomatic meanings of the words and, simply said, choose the appropriate definition according to the context. Both strategies show that compositional idioms are recognisable in their variant form also on the condition that their conventional form is familiar to the reader. (Glucksberg and McGlone 2001)

The flexibility of idioms

Glucksberg and McGlone (2001) have said that the “non-logical” [quotation marks theirs] nature of idioms is what makes them different from other fixed expressions. By non-logical they meant the aspect that the linguistic meaning of the words and their idiomatic meanings are not related, which, as mentioned before, is the general definition of idioms. For them, however, it was important to emphasize that idioms are not just long words but behave like phrases, meaning that they are “syntactically flexible, appearing, for example, in both active and passive forms (e.g. ‘Who let the cat out of the bag? It was let out by George, of course.’)” (2001:69). In his example the flexibility is shown by replacing the word “cat” by “it”, which would not be possible if not for the flexibility. He raises two issues:

To what extent are idioms compositional, that is, to what extent can the meaning of an idiom be derived from the meaning of its constituents? /.../ To what extent does an idiom's meaning depend on its syntactic form and to what extent can an idiom be open to syntactic analysis and transformation? (Glucksberg and McGlone 2001:69)

A very simple and summarizing answer would be that it all depends on the idiom. As he demonstrated, there are idioms like *by and large*, which have a very specific meaning and

therefore not syntactically flexible either. Others, like *skating on thin ice*, are on the other hand very flexible; one can change the tense, make it negative (not skate on thin ice), even replace words in the phrase (thin vs solid), and the meaning would still be understandable. Therefore, the flexibility of idioms differs a lot and depends on different aspects: transparency, syntactic analysability and semantic compositionality. (Glucksberg and McGlone 2001)

Fellbaum (2019), in her study on English and German idioms, found that the flexibility of idioms is very common and even more so than thought previously. Her study showed that idioms that were considered non-compositional by previous criteria, can be, however, modified as well. Though her findings contradict previous theories about the modification of idioms, she also found that, though more idioms are subject to modification than believed, there still is a system to these variations and they are “consistent with the rules of freely composed language” (Fellbaum 2019: 765).

Using idioms

Although there have not been many studies where the main subject has been the use of sports idioms specifically, the usage of idioms in general has been studied from different perspectives. In his book Liu (2008) devoted a chapter to introduce different functions and variations in the use of idioms, as well as how frequently they are used and distribution in different registers. The three major functions that Liu used to separate idioms were ideational, interpersonal and textual:

Ideational refers primarily to the use of language (or idioms in our specific case) to convey a person's experience, ideas, and views of the world, e.g. *passed out*, *kick the bucket*, and *dropped the ball*. Idiom uses in this function are mostly informational (i.e. to communicate ideas) and evaluative (i.e. to express views).

Interpersonal uses are interactional in nature and serve primarily to facilitate communication between the interlocutors, e.g. *What's up/cooking? I don't mind giving you my two cents (worth), by and large, and by any stretch of imagination. /.../* Textual uses, on the other hand, are those that help to organize information, highlight a theme, and provide textual cohesion (e.g. *in sum* and *to make a long story short*). (Liu 2008:28–29)

He also found that according to research idioms are used to convey negative meaning more often than positive. Liu referred to a corpus analysis by Moon (1998), which showed that about 66% of all idioms were used with negative connotations and only 34% with positive. Partly for that reason and because idioms are usually informal, they are not recommended to be used in all situations. Therefore, idioms should be used in social situations which are not formal and when it is not certain if it is appropriate. (Liu 2008)

Idioms and their positive and negative connotations

Ramirez (2019) analysed the use of metaphors in English (and Spanish) headlines that are used to convey the meanings of both victory and defeat. In her corpus, which consisted of 100 newspaper headlines in English, she discovered that there were more metaphors used for victory than defeat. That shows that although, as discussed before, in general there are more idioms and metaphors with negative connotations, in the headlines it is more common to use metaphors that communicate victory. While this thesis focuses on how sports idioms are used in spoken everyday English, Ramirez (2019) found that metaphors of war were most popular when reporting sports-related news. This relates to the idea of metaphorical concepts introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) with the concept 'sport is war'. What is interesting about this finding is that, as Ramirez also pointed out, Lakoff (1991) found the opposite,

meaning that war can be described as a sports event and using sports terms and metaphors, relating to the concept discussed in this thesis ‘life is sport’.

Significance of sports in American English

Kulyukina studied phraseological units and their use in everyday language, movies, and emotive prose in American English. “Americans prize individuality and competitiveness, and sports is an extension of these characteristic” (Kulyukina 2016: 46). Her ideas coincide with the ‘life is sport’ metaphorical concepts mentioned previously. According to Kulyukina, American culture has cultivated the meaning ‘life is a sports game’. Sports terminology and idioms are used daily by Americans as they reflect their values in life. In her article she gave examples of how many sports idioms can be found in everyday conversations, books, and movies. The movie example was from “Wall Street” (a film directed by Oliver Stone), which gives a view into the business world, where idioms like *and they are off running*, *get to first base* or *the cards are on the table* and many others were used throughout the movie. The popularity of sports is how sports terminology has found its way into everyday language and has spread throughout the English language thanks to mediums like movies and books, but also influential people. (Kulyukina 2016)

CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF SPORTS IDIOMS IN MOVIES

The empirical part of the thesis consists of a corpus-based study on sports idioms and their use in movies. The aim was to analyse a set of well-known sports idioms, so in order to make the choice which idioms to include, the Google search engine was used with the search phrase ‘sports idioms’. The idioms in the study were selected from an article on FluentU website (Wright n.d.), which listed 10 powerful sports idioms and their meanings. This was

one of the first hits to the Google search, meaning that it was high in relevance and therefore the idioms in the article should be popular as well. 10 idioms were considered a reasonable amount to analyse in depth to understand the use of popular sports idioms, therefore no additional idioms to the ones in the article were analysed.

The idioms were analysed using The Movie corpus (Davies 2019). The focus was to get an understanding how has the use of idioms changed over the years in frequency and the popularity of the idioms in different English varieties (American, British, Canadian). Some of the idioms can vary in structure (verb in different tense, use of different pronouns, etc), therefore, in order to get a more comprehensive overview of the use of the idioms more than one search phrase was used for most of them.

In addition, the idioms were categorized using Makkai's (1972) idiom classification system, which is described above in the literature review section. As this thesis analyses popular sports idioms, the first category of sememic idioms, the "first base" idioms, includes them all but as Liu (2008:18) pointed out most of the idioms in that category are also lexemes. Therefore, the idiom being a "first base" idiom will only be mentioned in the analysis if the idiom does not classify as a lexemic idiom and the focus of will be on the subcategories of lexemic idioms. None of the other sememic idiom subcategories are represented in this thesis. While Liu (2008:17–18) has made a comprehensive summary of Makkai's system as shown above in Table 1, Makkai himself in his book (1972) described the categories and their subcategories in more detail. Due to that some of the idioms in this study are classified into the phrasal compounds category, although they are not noun and adjective compounds as they should be according to the table.

All the idioms were analysed in the metaphorical context of ‘life is sport’ to illustrate the way they apply to everyday situations. As the final part of the analysis the idioms were divided into groups, based on whether they have negative or positive meanings, to see whether the findings by Moon (1998) introduced in the literature review apply to the selection of idioms in this thesis as well.

Corpus description

The Movie corpus (Davies 2019) is available online and therefore is a good way to analyse the idioms used in movies. The corpus contains movies from 1930 to 2018 from 6 different countries, more than 25 000 movies in all and 200 million words in all. As the corpus consists of movie texts, on-screen conversations, it is a resource of informal language and gives a good insight into the use of sports idioms in spoken English.

The corpus gives an opportunity to analyse the result according to their frequency in movies in different decades and dialects. For dialects, the corpus classifies the results into four categories: US/CA (or American), UK/IE (British), AU/NZ (Australian) and Misc (miscellaneous).

ANALYSIS

On the home stretch

Wright (n.d.) explains the idiom *on the home stretch* as follows: “In racing, the home stretch means the last part of the track. When an athlete sees the home stretch, they know the race is nearly finished. This idiom is used when something is nearing completion.”

The full idiom *on the home stretch* has been used in movies in total only nine times. (Figure 1) Both 1930s and 2010s have three occurrences of the idiom, 2000s two and once in a 1940s movie. The idiom has appeared in six movies which have been identified with American variety and three with British.

For comparison, the idiomatic part of the idiom *home stretch* was looked up separately. The shorter phrase occurred in the corpus 72 times, with the most appearances in 2010s. The frequency statistics show that the idiom had a slight decrease in popularity in the second half of the 20th century but has become more popular than ever with the turn of the century and the use has doubled with in the last two decades.

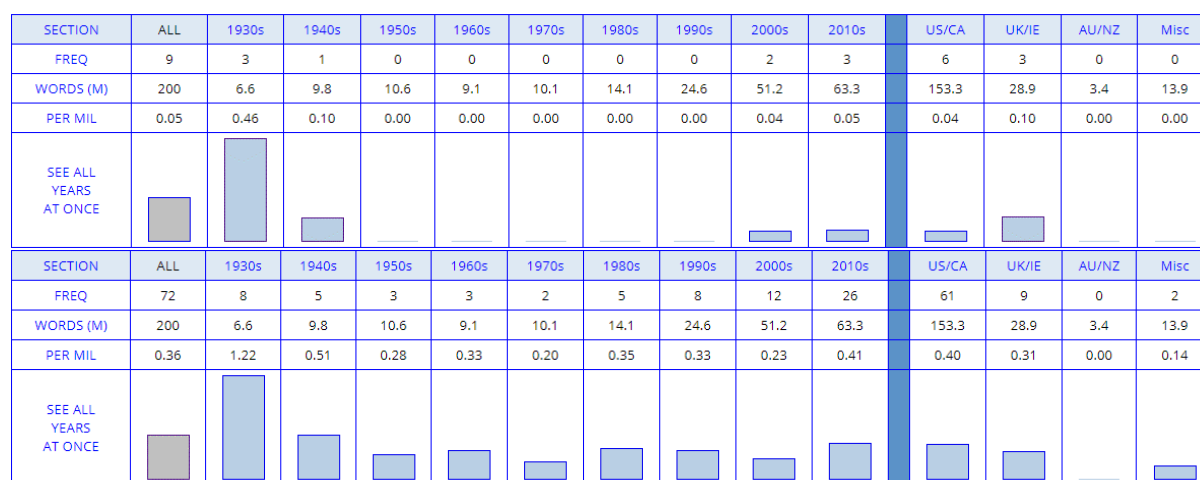


Figure 1. The idioms 'On the home stretch' and 'home stretch' in movies.

According to Makkai's (1972) classification system the idiom *on the home stretch* does not belong to any of the lexemic idioms categories; therefore, it is a sememic idiom in the first base category. The shorter version *home stretch*, however, is part of the lexemic idioms phrasal compounds category, as it consists of two nouns (Makkai 1972: 325).

Front runner

Wright's (n.d.) explanation for *front runner*: "The front runner /.../ is the athlete who is in the lead during a race. This person is in front, but hasn't won yet. A front runner means the favorite or the person who is considered most likely to get or win something."

This idiom has not been in frequent use in movies. Only seven occurrences in total have been recorded in the Movie Corpus (Figure 2). The first two in 1980s. Five times has the phrase been recorded in the 21st century: twice in the 2000s and three times in the 2010s. The very first occurrence of the idiom recorded in 1982 in "Monty Phyton Live at the Hollywood Bowl", where it was used in one of the performed sketches.

As the statistics show, the idiom *front runner* is used both in American and British English, with four and three occurrences categorized, respectively.

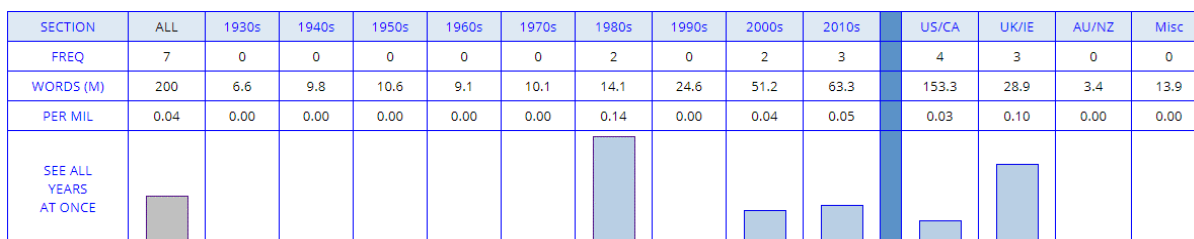


Figure 2. The idiom 'front runner' in movies.

Front runner is according to Makkai's (1972) idiom classification system a lexemic idiom in the category phrasal compounds. The word 'front' serves as an adjective and 'runner' is a noun, as the description of that category requires.

The ball is in your court

"In tennis, when the ball is on your side of the court, it is your turn to hit the ball. This is used to mean that it is someone's turn to take action or make the next move." (Wright n.d.)

The idiom *the ball is in your court* is used with both the word ‘is’ written out and in shortened form, therefore both versions were looked up to get a full overview of the idioms use. The third table in Figure 3 shows that there are also four occasions when the idioms has been used without the definite article (in addition to the eight with the article ‘the’; all the results shown in the second table are also included in the third), which makes the total number of mentions of the idiom 16. The first use of the idiom was in the 1980s and its popularity has grown slowly, having ten occurrences in 2000s and seven in the 2010s. This idiom is more characteristic of American English and is the first idiom in the list to have associations with the Australian variety as well.

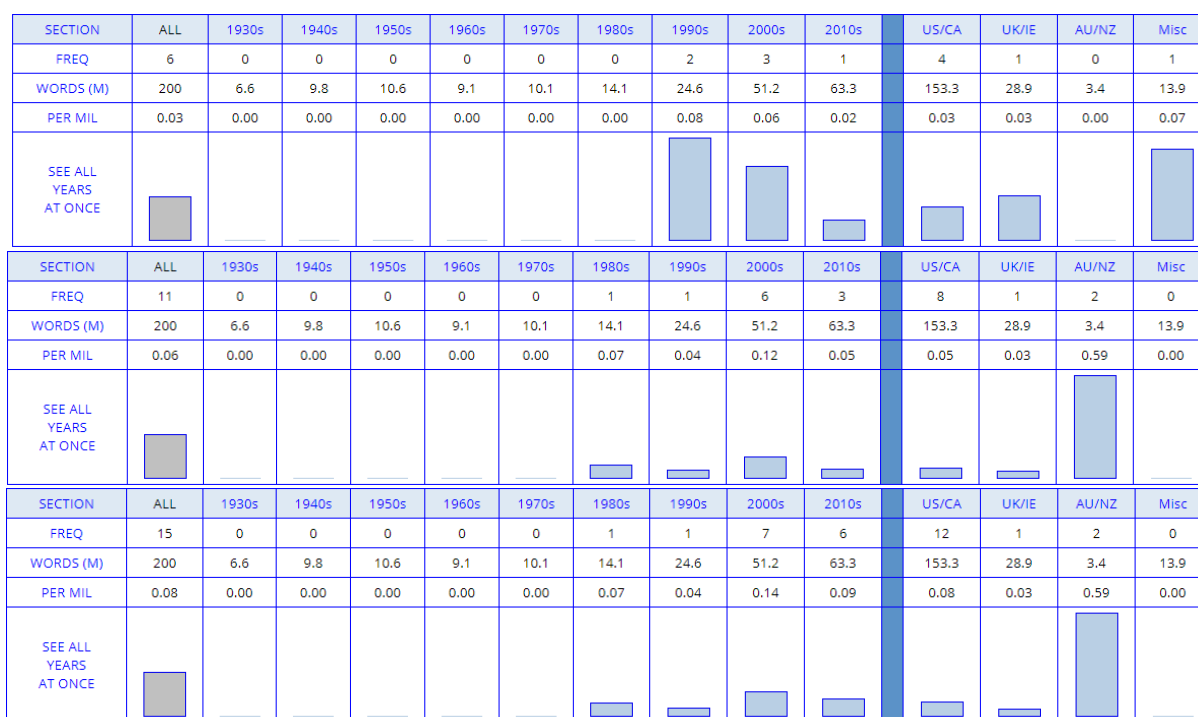


Figure 3. The idioms ‘the ball is in your court’, ‘the ball’s in your court’ and ‘ball’s in your court’ in movies.

The ball is in your court is according to Makkai (1972) a tournure. The structure of a tournure requires a verb: in this case ‘is’; and at least two other lexons: ‘the ball’ being a noun with a definite article, ‘in’ – a preposition, ‘your’ – a possessive pronoun and ‘court’ – a noun.

Par for the course

Par for the course is an idiom originated from the golf course. Wright (n.d.) had explained the meaning of the idiom in his article as follows: „On a golf course, each hole has a par. This is the number of strokes that a player should need to finish a hole. This is the standard by which other golfers’ scores are measured. This phrase means something that is normal or to be expected.”

Par the course first occurred in movies in the 1940s, with one reference and in the 1950s had its peak in the 20th century with five occurrences, which was repeated in the 1980s. The use of this idiom has tripled in the 21st century, however, having been used 15 times in movies of the 2000s and 18 times in the 2010s (Figure 4). The total number of uses for this golf idiom is 49 and 40 of those are in movies in American English. By relying on these statistics, it can be said that this idiom is part of the American English discourse and the Brits have loaned the idiom in their movies on six occasions. Three of the mentions of *par for the course* have been categorised as miscellaneous.

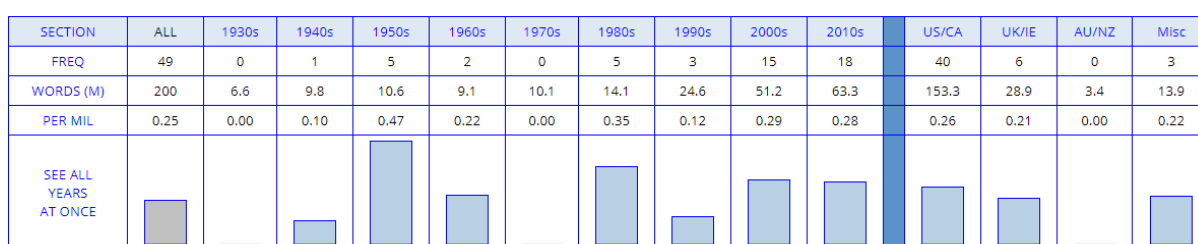


Figure 4. The idiom ‘par for the course’ in movies.

This is widely known golfing expression can be classified as a lexemic idiom in the phrasal compound subcategory. Although it does not match the definition in Table 1, Makkai (1972: 334) said that “nominals consisting of two nouns connected by one or more prepositions and (optionally) an article” are categorized as phrasal compounds as well.

Therefore, *par for the course* with its two nouns ‘par’ and ‘course’, preposition ‘for’ and article ‘the’ fits into that category.

Out of someone’s league

„The ‘league’ here is in reference to baseball leagues, where teams are grouped by their performance.” has Wright (n.d.) said. He explained: “When we talk about a person being out of someone’s league, we mean that the person is too good for them.”

This idiom is one which has different variations in different contexts. The word ‘someone’ can be replaced by possessive pronouns ‘my’, ‘your’, ‘our’, ‘their’, ‘his’ or ‘her’. For the analysis all the variants were searched in the corpus to get a comprehensive understanding of its use and all the search results are shown collectively in Figure 5. The collective number of mentions of the idiom is 411, which makes it the second most popular idiom in analysed in this thesis. Some of its popularity can be credited to the fact that it has many variations, however even when considering only the most popular variant *out of your league* it still outweighs most of the other idioms in this thesis.

The idiom has become more popular over time. Its first use in movies is on record in the 1930s, which was also the only use of it in that decade and had to wait until the 1950s to be used again in a movie. Two versions of the idiom were mentions three times in the 1950s.

The most uses for the idiom with all the variants combined have been recorded in movies released in the 2000s with 164 references in total. The 2010s are closely behind with 151 occurrences.

The idiom is used mostly in American movies as 322 times out of the total 411 have been categorised as American English. 54 occurrences were in British English, seven Australian and 28 miscellaneous.

Out of someone's league cannot be included in any of the lexemic idioms subcategories, making it a “first base” idiom. (Makkai 1972).

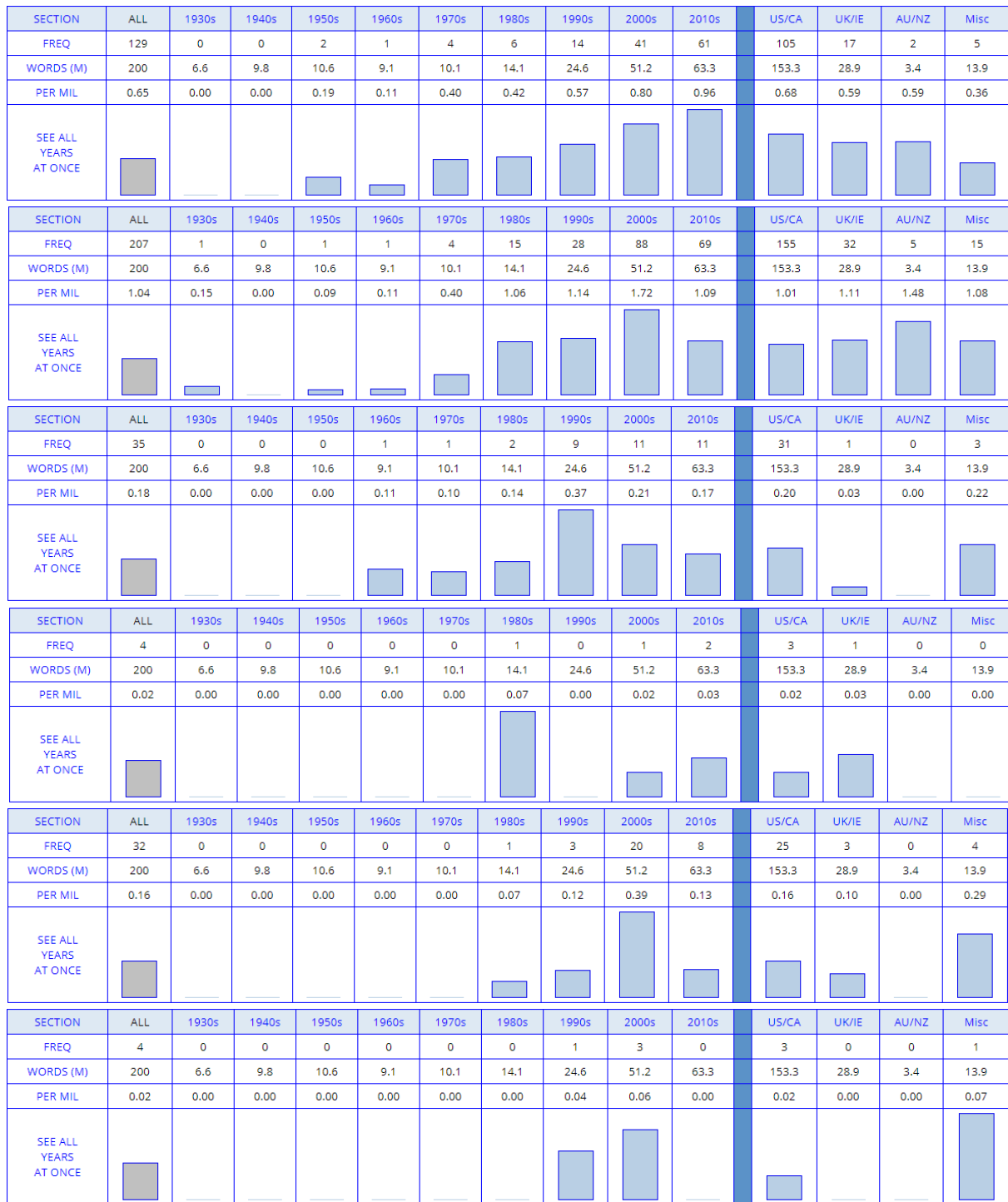


Figure 5. The idioms 'out of *my* league', 'out of *your* league', 'out of *our* league', 'out of *their* league', 'out of *his* league' and 'out of *her* league' in movies.

Two/three strikes and you are out

The next idiom of baseball origin in this thesis is *Two/three strikes and you're out* and Wright (n.d.) has explained the meaning behind this idiom as follows:

When a player is batting in a baseball game and they get three strikes, they are out of the game. If a player has two strikes against them, they know that they are on their final chance. This is often used to talk about someone's track record (or their past performance). If they have made two mistakes, that is two strikes. If they make three, then you are no longer willing to give them more chances. (Wright n.d.)

This idiom is one that can be used in different ways. In addition to there being option between 'two' and 'three' depending on the context, there are also options of either using the shorter version 'you're' or the longer 'you are'. The first part of the idiom 'two/three strikes' is also used independently and at times with the ordinal numerals 'second/third strike'. Therefore, all the previously mentioned variants were searched in the corpus. The *two strikes* and *three strikes* search result also include the full versions of the idioms, hence the choice to use shorter search phrases to receive the most accurate result of the use of this idiomatic phrase. The results are presented in Figure 6.

The different versions of the idiom have been mentioned in movies 261 times in total. The number of occurrences has increased over time and has been the most popular in the recent decade (2010s) with a total of 100 uses in movies. The first occurrence of the idiom was in the 1930s with two results for *two strikes* and one for *three strikes*. Most of the uses have been categorised as American English (247 of 261). Seven occurrences have been categorised as British, five as miscellaneous and two as Australian.

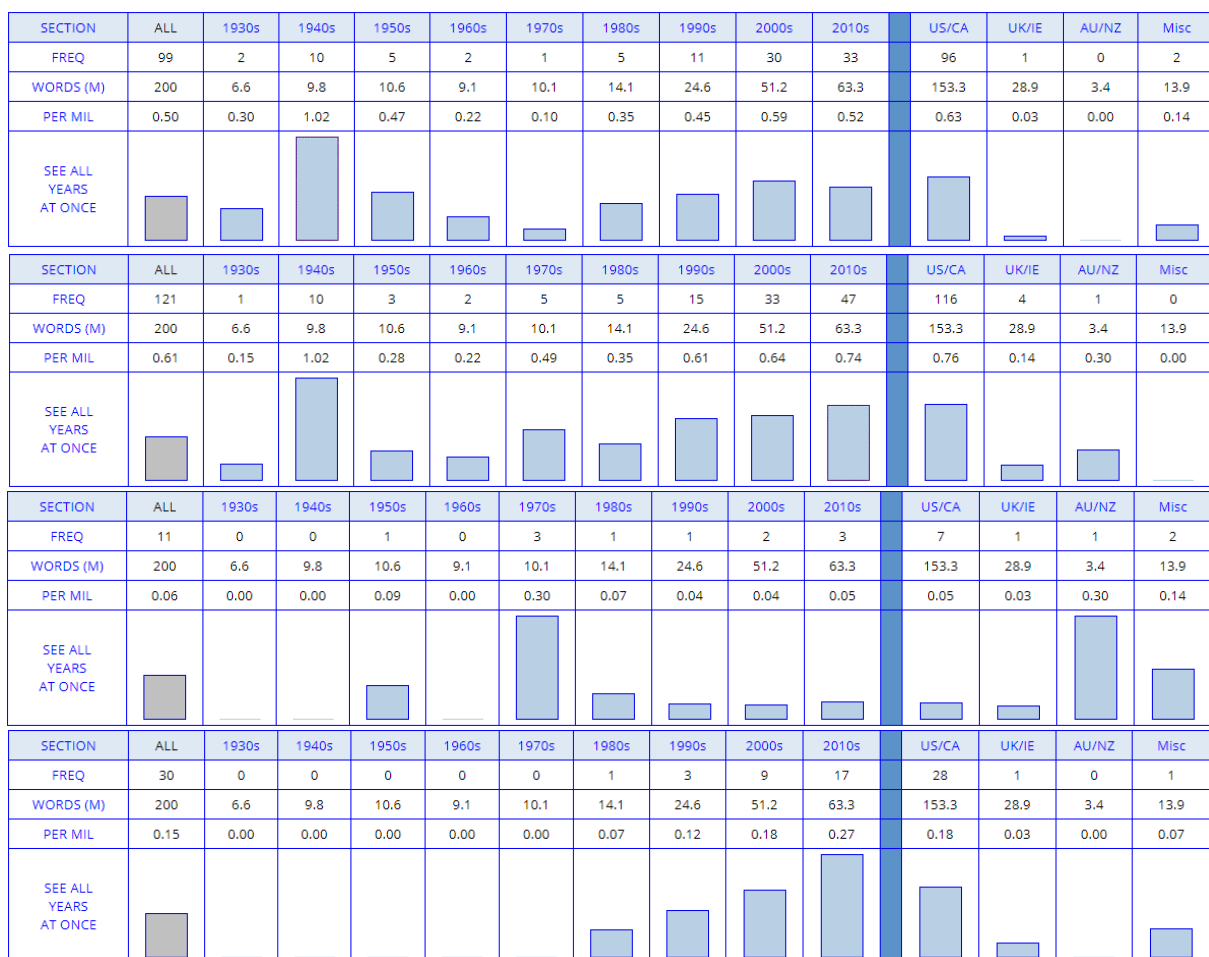


Figure 6. The idioms 'two strikes', 'three strikes', 'second strike' and 'third strike' in movies.

Makkai's (1972) idiom classification system puts the shorter version *two/three strikes* into the category of sememic idioms. *Strike two/three* can convey the same idiomatic meaning in a conversation, meaning that the structure of this idiom is flexible. This phrase could be best classified as a "first base" idiom. However, analysing the full version of the idiom would make it a tournure as the added part 'and you are out' includes a verb, which is a characteristic of idioms in that category.

Drop the ball

The meaning of *drop the ball* has been described by Wright (n.d.) as follows: "In baseball, when a fielder drops the ball, the other team can gain an advantage by running

through the bases. To drop the ball is to make a mistake or to make a mess of something, often through carelessness.”

Four different variants of *drop the ball* have been used in movies according to the corpus results. In addition to the present tense version ‘drop’, ‘dropped’, ‘dropping’ and ‘drops’ also occurred as verbs in the idiom, whereas the past tense ‘dropped’ was the most popular with 84 hits. As can be seen in Figure 7, the idiom was first used in movies in the 1940s and started gaining more popularity in the 1990s. The idiom has been used in movies 139 times in total and 120 times in American English. The other 19 occurrences have been divided into British, Australian and miscellaneous with ten, seven and two occurrences, respectively.

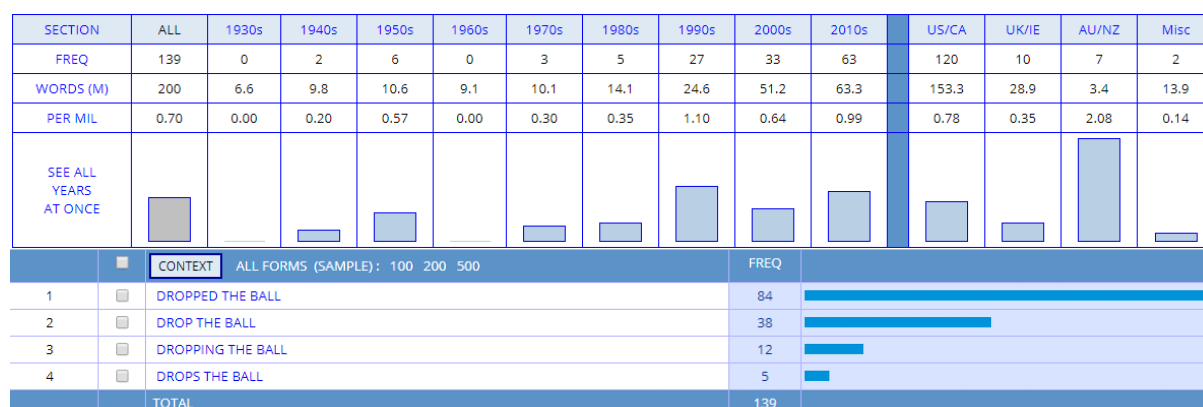


Figure 7. The variants of the idiom ‘drop the ball’ in movies.

Drop the ball is a clear example of a tournure in Makkai’s (1972) classification system. The idiom consists of the verb ‘drop’, the article ‘the’ and a noun ‘ball’, corresponding to the definition of that subcategory of lexemic idioms.

Hit a home run /knock it out of the park

The two baseball idioms have the same idiomatic meaning, which is the reason why they are grouped together. According to Wright (n.d.) the way to understand the idioms is this:

„Knocking it out of the park means the batter hits the ball so hard that it leaves the park. A home run is where a player runs through all four bases and scores for their team. To hit a home run or knock it out of the park means to do a fantastic job on something.”

Although the idioms are grouped together by their meaning by Wright (n.d.) they were analysed separately in the thesis, because unlike the previously grouped idioms these are not different versions of one idiom. They are two different idioms with different using patterns, just with the same meaning.

The search phrase for *knock it out of the park* was ‘out of the park’ as the aim was to include all uses of the idiom, because some versions with the idioms use the word ‘hit’ as the verb in the phrase. It can also be used in the past tense or have the same idiomatic meaning without including the verb in the phrase at all. Figure 8 shows that the idiom has been in constant use starting from the 1930s up to the 2010s with increasing popularity. 153 results in total make it one of the most frequent sports idioms in movies included in this thesis. The idiom is clearly from American English with 145 results, six occurrences were put down as miscellaneous, one as British and one as Australian.

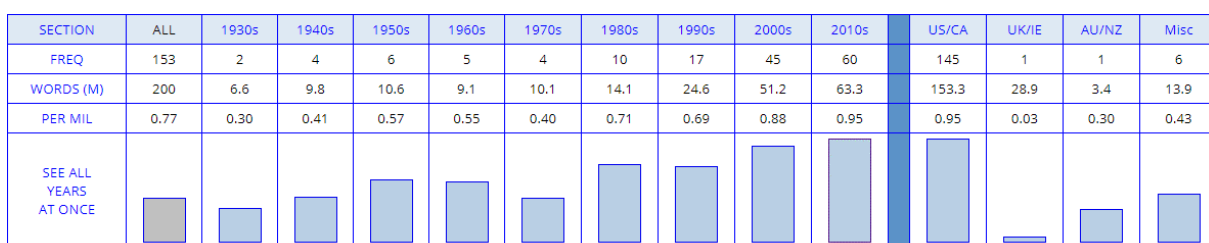


Figure 8. The idiom ‘out of the park’ in movies.

Hit a home run was only searched and analysed as a whole phrase, although the same idiomatic meaning can be conveyed in conversations with only the phrase ‘home run’ as well. The phrase ‘home run’ has 486 results in the corpus and would be by far the most used idiom

analysed in the thesis. However, as many movies include baseball games in their story, in the majority of the results for ‘home run’ the phrase was used in its literal not idiomatic meaning and therefore would not have been in concordance with the subject of this thesis.

Figure 9 presents the results for *hit a home run* and as can be seen, the idiom has been used 72 times, with the most mentions in 1990s (22). As with ‘out of the park’, the phrase is mostly used in American English, with only two of the results classified in other categories (one in British and one in miscellaneous).

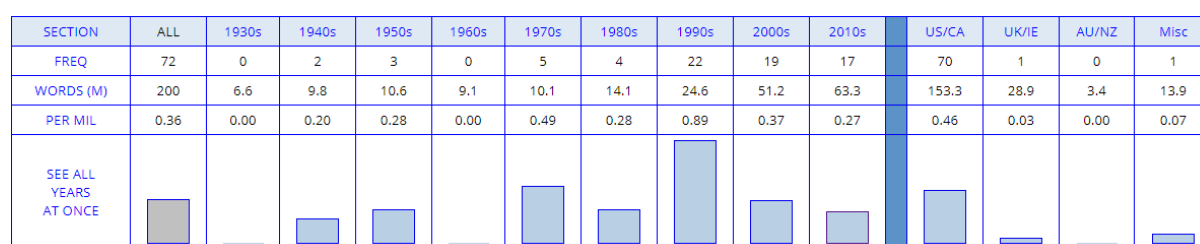


Figure 9. The idiom ‘hit a home run’ in movies.

By classification both idioms *knock it out of the park* and *hit a home run* are tournures with ‘knock and ‘hit’ being the required verbs in the idioms. As mentioned previously both idioms also include an idiomatic phrase that can be used on its own. *Home run* can be classified as a phrasal compound because it belongs to one of its subcategories. Makkai (1972:329) has shown that some compounds are noun + verb compounds, therefore the noun ‘home’ and the verb ‘run’ make it a phrasal compound idiom. *Out of the park* does not fit into any lexemic idiom categories and is an example of a “first base” idiom and sememic.

Strike out

„To strike out in baseball is to have three failed attempts at batting, which means you are then out. To strike out is to fail at something.” (Wright n.d.)

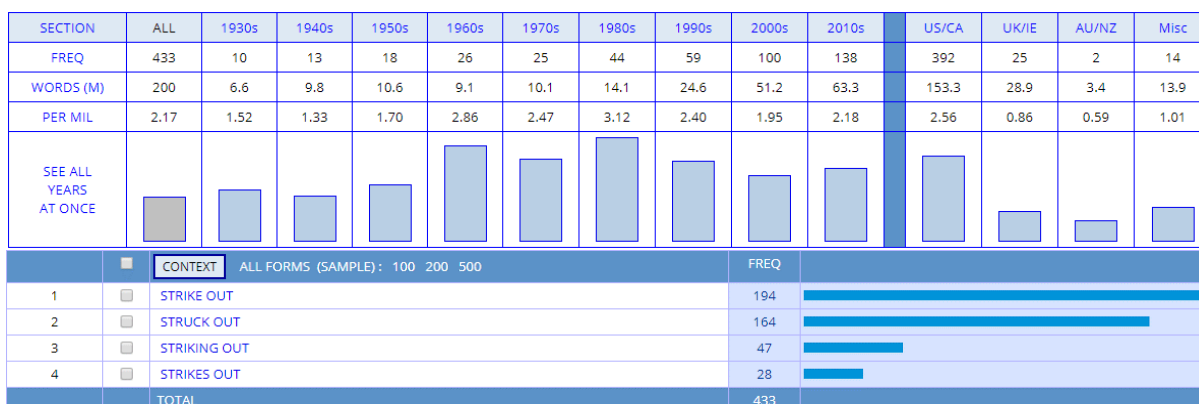


Figure 10. The variants of the idiom 'strike out' in movies.

The four versions of the idiom: 'strike out', 'struck out', 'striking out' and 'strikes out' have been in use for decades. The idiom was first used in the 1930 movies and their use has been steadily increasing with every decade. All versions of the idiom combined yielded 433 results in total (Figure 10), making it the most popular idiom analysed in this thesis. As with other baseball idioms this one is also mostly categorised as American, although compared with others it has more occurrences (25) in the British variety as well. 14 of the occurrences were sorted as miscellaneous and two as Australian.

Strike out is the only example of a lexemic idiom in the subcategory phrasal verbs analysed in this thesis. The definition of the category requires an idiom to consist of a verb (strike) and one or two particles (out).

Out of left field

The last idiom analysed in this thesis is *out of left field*, which is also of baseball origin. Wright (n.d.) has explained its meaning in his article: „In the game of baseball, this literally refers to the area covered by the left fielder. The left fielder is the farthest away from the first base and has longer to throw /.../. This is used when talking about an event that is very surprising or unexpected.”

Out of left field has 38 hits in the Movie Corpus and was first used in 1950s. Figure 11 shows that its use has steadily increased with decades and the idiom has the largest number of occurrences in movies in the 2010s with 14 results. By dialect 33 of the result were categorised as American, four as miscellaneous and one as British.

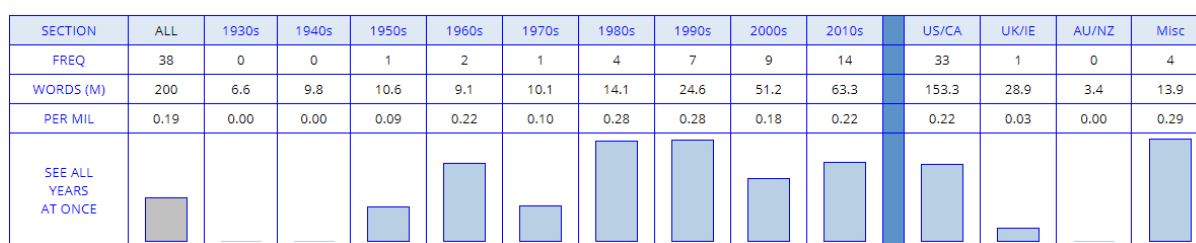


Figure 11. The idiom ‘out of left field’ in movies.

The idiom *out of left field* does not meet any of the requirements of lexemic idioms subcategories and fits only into the category “first base” idioms according to Makkai’s system, making it a sememic idiom.

Metaphorical concept ‘life is sport’

The Movie Corpus (Davies 2019) enables us to see search phrases in their context as well. Thus, one can see how the use of these sports idioms supports the metaphorical concept of ‘life is sport’. One can be *on the home stretch* with any project, be a *front runner* in an election, someone’s behaviour can be *par for the course* or one can *drop the ball* with their grades. *Strike out* and *hit a home run* are useful idioms in the business field, when talking about deals. *Knock it out of the park* can be used for example when talking about a successful performance. To be *out of someone’s league* is often used in the context of relationships and anything surprising can be *out of left field*. *The ball’s in your court* or having *two strikes* fits well into the context of arguments. These are only a few examples of different situations where these sports idioms apply in everyday life as well.

Sports idioms with positive and negative meanings

As mentioned in the literature review section, it has been found that there are more idioms with negative than positive connotations. The meanings of the sports idioms chosen for the analysis were analysed in that aspect as well.

The idioms with a negative connotation represented in this thesis are *strike out*, *drop the ball*, *two/three strikes and you're out* and *out of someone's league*. The first refers to failure, the second and third one indicate that mistakes have been made and the fourth one means not being good enough.

The idioms with positive connotations are *on the home stretch*, *front runner* and *hit a home run/knock it out of the park*. Here the first one indicates that one is close to achieving their goal, the second that someone is a favourite, and the third that something has been done successfully.

Three of the idioms can not be defined as simple negative or positive. *Par for the course* means that something is as expected, but whether the expectations were good or bad depends on the context. *The ball is in your court* means it's someone's turn to make the next move and *out of left field* means that something is surprising, but again whether these are positive or negative things depends on the situations.

RESULTS

The first aspect analysed in the corpus-based study was the frequency of the selected sports idioms occurrences in the Movie corpus (Davies 2019). The frequency ranged from 7 to 433 hits, meaning that the popularity of the said idioms is very different. The most popular idiom according to this study is *strike out* and the least popular *front runner* (Table 2). The

three idioms which got the most hits in the corpus (*strike out, out of someone's league, two/three strikes and you're out*) have all different variants, which enables to use them more flexibly in different contexts, which might one of the reason for their higher frequency. Most of the idioms analysed in the thesis are baseball related and they are in general more popular out of the selected idioms than the idiomatic phrases from other sports which were included in the study. The popularity of baseball idioms probably comes from the popularity of sport itself. As it is one of the most popular sports in America and most uses of idioms were found to be in American English as well, it is clear that their culture and language is affected by the sport as well.

| Idiom | Frequency |
|------------------------------------|------------------|
| On the home stretch (home stretch) | 9 (72) |
| Front runner | 7 |
| The ball is in your court | 16 |
| Par for the course | 49 |
| Out of someone's league | 411 |
| Two/three strikes and you're out | 261 |
| Drop the ball | 139 |
| Knock it out of the park | 153 |
| Hit a home run | 72 |
| Strike out | 433 |
| Out of left field | 38 |

Table 2. The frequency of sports idioms in movies.

As for the idioms' popularity from the 1930s to the 2010s, all the idioms came into more frequent use with time. An important factor to consider is that the production of movies

has also increased significantly. The diagrams in the figures show the popularity of the idioms taking into account the quantity of movies in the corpus from a specific period, but as the aim of this study was to analyse the frequency in general, this was not analysed further.

According to the study the idioms that were used in the earliest movies included in the corpus were *on the home stretch*, *two/three strikes*, *out of the park* and *strike out*. *Out of someone's league* had one hit in the 1930s but came into constant use only in the 1950s. the newest idioms in movies are *front runner* and *the ball's in your court* which first appeared in movies in the 1980s. The appearance of different sports idioms in movies is influenced by the appearance of the sport itself. The fact that baseball is an older sport than basketball is reflected in the use of idioms as well – as baseball idioms have earlier occurrences in movies than basketball idioms.

Out the four categories of dialect that were included in the corpus each idiom had the most results categorised as American English. All the idioms had at least one hit which was classified as British English. For Australian English there were four idioms which had no results in the search: *on the home stretch*, *front runner*, *par for the course* and *out of left field*. Here the factor that more movies in American English are included in the corpus than of other varieties must also be considered. For further studies, as with the frequency through time, the quantity of movies of each dialect in the corpus should be taken into consideration to get the most accurate result of popularity in different varieties of English.

However, based on this study, it can be said that as baseball is a very popular sport in America, baseball idioms are also much more popular in American English than in other varieties. What influences the use of idioms in movies is of course the theme of the movie as

well and as sports are a huge part of American culture, they are very often represented in their movies as well. Kulyukina (2016) claimed that the American values have many similarities with sports, and, therefore, sports idioms are widely used in their everyday language, which is reflected in their movies as well.

The last aspect by which each of the idioms was analysed was their classification according to Makkai's idiom classification system. Both the shorter and longer versions of the idioms were categorized. As mentioned before the analysis, all the idioms classify as sememic idioms and in the subcategory of "first base" idioms, as they are all known across English-speaking countries through the popularity of sports. Four of the idioms (*on the home stretch*, *out of someone's league*, *two/three strikes and you're out* and *out of left field*) could only be classified as sememic. The other idioms fit into the lexemic idiom subcategories as well.

The idioms *front runner*, *home run*, *par for the course* and *home stretch* belong to the category of phrasal compounds. *The ball is in your court*, *drop the ball*, *knock it out of the park* and *hit a home run* are all classified as tournures. The last category represented in this thesis is phrasal verbs and it includes the idiom *strike out*.

In addition, the selected idioms were interpreted as a group to illustrate the way the use of them supports the metaphorical concept of 'life is sport' and to determine whether they are used in positive or negative contexts. As noted throughout the thesis, the nature of sports makes it easy to apply sports terms to other areas of life as well, whether it is business, personal relationships, education or something else, and looking at the context in which these idioms were used in movies supports that idea.

Out of the 10 different meanings of idioms analysed in the thesis, four were found to be negative (*strike out*, *drop the ball*, *two/three strikes and you're out* and *out of someone's league*) and three positive (*on the home stretch*, *front runner* and *hit a home run/knock it out of the park*). The other three (*par for the course*, *the ball is in your court* and *out of left field*) are neutral on their own and it is the context which gives them a positive or a negative connotation. Although 10 idioms are not enough to make any definite conclusions, the selection of the study corresponds with the findings mentioned in the literature review that there are more negative idioms than positive.

CONCLUSION

Idioms are a form of figurative speech, which has been difficult to define as different scholars have defined them for different research purposes. However, the generally accepted definition is that an idiom is a phrase or a compound word, which has a rigid structure and its meaning is not directly derived from the meanings of their constituents. The meanings of some idioms are connected to their literal meanings, but some must be learned in order to understand them.

The corpus-based study focused on ten idioms and analysed their use in movies. Three main aspects were studied: the occurrences of the idioms, how the frequency has changed over time and which English variety the idioms are characteristic of. In addition, the idioms were classified into categories according to Makkai's idiom classification system, analysed in the context of 'life is sport' concept and categorized as positive, negative or neutral.

The results of the study showed that some of the selected idioms were more flexible than others and their different variants had to be included in the analysis to get a better

overview of the subject. The occurrence frequency and their first appearance times were different, but all the idioms have become more popular in the recent decades. The majority of the occurrences in movies were categorised as being used in American English, which refers to the popularity of sports in American culture. According to the classification system used in the study there were four different categories represented in this thesis. Some of the idioms could be classified in more than one category. Both idioms with positive and negative connotations were represented in this study and three were found to be flexible in that aspect, being dependent on the situation. All the idioms support the metaphorical concept of 'life is sport'.

For further studies on the subject the quantity of movies in a specific category (decade or variety) compared to the occurrences of the idioms might be considered to receive a more thorough analysis of the use of the idioms.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Marin Merisalu

Sports idioms in movies: a corpus-based study Spordiidiomid filmides: korpuspõhine uuring

Bakalaureusetöö

2020

Lehekülgede arv: 37

Annotatsioon:

Töö eesmärk oli saada ülevaade spordiidiomide kasutusest filmides ajavahemikul 1930–2018 ning selle käigus tutvuda idiomide klassifitseerimissüsteemidega.

Töö koosneb kahest osast: kirjanduse ülevaade ning empiiriline osa. Kirjanduse ülevaade käsitleb idiomide määratlust erinevate uurijate pilgu läbi, nende mõistmise erinevaid aspekte ning tutvustab mõnda idiomide alast uurimistööd. Empiiriline osa koosneb korpuspõhisest uuringust, kus *The Movie Corpus*’e põhjal uuriti valitud idiomide kasutust filmides ajavahemikul 1930–2018. Lisaks uuriti korpuse andmete põhjal millisele inglise keelekujule (ameerika, briti, austraalia) on valitud idiomid kõige iseloomulikumad.

Uuringu tulemusena selgus, et valitud kümnest spordiidiomist olid kõige populaarsemad pesapallist pärit idiomid. Aja jooksul on idiomide kasutus filmides järjest kasvanud ning põhiliselt on nad iseloomulikud just Ameerika inglise keelele.

Märksõnad:

Inglise keel ja keeleteadus, idiomid, spordiidiomud, korpuspõhine uuring, keelekasutus filmides, ameerika, briti, austraalia.

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